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ABSTRACT

Expectations of performance in a foreign language are important predictors of future achievement. Two types of bias occur in foreign language learning: self-enhancement bias, which pertains to students who are unrealistically optimistic about their ability to learn a foreign language; and self-derogation bias, which pertains to those students who have little or no confidence in their ability to learn a foreign language. The purpose of this study is to investigate the prevalence of these two biases and to compare students with these two biases, as well as those with accurate self-assessments of their foreign language performance, with respect to anxiety and overall academic achievement. Participants were 213 college students enrolled in Spanish, French, or German classes. Self-enhancement bias was more than three times as prevalent as self-derogation bias--47.4% versus 13.6% respectively. Students with self-derogation bias tended to have significantly higher levels of anxiety about foreign languages, while those with self-enhancement bias tended to have overall lower levels of academic performance. It is concluded that self-enhancement bias has a greater potential than does self-derogation bias to facilitate language learning because language learning anxiety has been implicated as a probable cause of language learning difficulties. Discerning and understanding these expectations may help foreign language instructors better target and help affected students. (Author/KFT)

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The Role of Expectations in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Two types of biases occur in foreign language learning. The first bias, self-enhancement, pertains to students who are unrealistically optimistic about their ability to learn a foreign language. The second bias, self-derogation, pertains to students who have little or no confidence in their performance in foreign language classes. The purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence of these two biases and to compare students with these two biases, as well as those with accurate self-perceptions of their foreign language performance, with respect to anxiety and overall academic achievement. Participants were 213 college students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, enrolled in Spanish, French, or German classes. Self-enhancement bias (47.4%) was more than three times as prevalent as was self-derogation bias (13.6%). Students with self-derogation bias tended to have statistically significantly higher levels of anxiety about foreign languages, whereas those with self-enhancement bias tended to have lower levels of overall academic achievement. The implications of these findings are discussed.

The Role of Expectations in Foreign Language Learning

Research (e.g., Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1998) has shown that students' expectations of their performance in a foreign language course are important predictors of their future achievement. Most recently, Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (1999a) developed a path analysis model called the Anxiety-Expectation Mediation (AEM) Model, in which expectation plays a central role in predicting foreign language achievement. According to this model, expectation and anxiety mediate the relationships between foreign language achievement and other cognitive, personality, and demographic variables. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999a) concluded that the importance of expectation in the AEM model suggests that social cognition theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) in general, and self-efficacy theory in particular (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986, 1997), is pertinent in the foreign language learning process, since expectation is a manifestation of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy theory predicts that one's belief system influences behavior choices, effort invested, persistence, and task success in the acquisition of a foreign language (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999a).

The findings of Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999a) are supported by Ganschow and Sparks (1991), who reported that students' perceptions of the ease of learning foreign languages are the primary indicators of their propensity to experience foreign language learning difficulties. Moreover, according to Krashen (1980), the low expectations of many foreign language students make them unreceptive to language input, thereby impeding the learning process.

Horwitz (1990) noted that students enroll in foreign language classes with preconceived beliefs about how to learn a language, coupled with expectations as to their ability to accomplish this task. These beliefs and

expectations can affect students' foreign language achievement. In particular, a self-fulfilling prophecy may prevail, in which students who have low expectations of their foreign language ability exhibit behaviors that may lead to underachievement (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999a). Thus, the accuracy of students' expectations may be a key factor in determining foreign language performance, through its effect on the effort expended when students are confronted with a novel and challenging situation (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994).

Some researchers have found that most learners have an accurate perception of their language learning ability (Blanche & Merino, 1989). Indeed, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1998) suggested that the positive relationship between expectations and foreign language achievement might reflect the fact that students have an accurate perception of their foreign language ability. Blanche and Merino (1989) observed that, when skills to be assessed in foreign language classes are lucid and detailed, "there is consistent overall agreement between self-assessments and ratings based on a variety of external criteria" (p. 315). However, the foreign language expectations of some students can be subject to errors (Ready-Morfitt, as cited in McIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997). In particular, McIntyre et al. (1997) identified two errors or biases that prevail when students are attempting to learn a foreign language. The first bias, called self-enhancement (i.e., over-estimation), pertains to the students who are unrealistically optimistic about their ability to learn a foreign language. According to these researchers, such bias may stem from students' need to increase their feelings of self-worth. The second bias, called self-derogation (i.e., under-estimation), pertains to students who have little or no confidence in their performance in foreign language classes.

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Evidence of self-derogation has been provided (DesBrisay, 1984; Ferguson, 1978; Holec, 1979; MacIntyre et al. 1997). For some students, self-derogation may be used as a defense mechanism against loss of self-esteem in the event of failure (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Norem & Cantor, 1986).

Although over-estimation appears to be the most widely reported bias (Blanche & Merion, 1989; Heilenman, 1990; Oscarson, 1984), it is not clear how much more prevalent this bias is than is under-estimation. This was the purpose of the present study. Also of interest was to determine characteristics of self-enhancers and self-derogators. Specifically, we sought to compare self-enhancers, self-derogators, and students with accurate perceptions of their foreign language competence with respect to anxiety about foreign languages and overall academic achievement. These variables were selected because they have been found to be the two best predictors of achievement in foreign language classes (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1998).

Method

Participants

Participants were 213 college students (67.0% female) from a number of disciplines, who were enrolled in Spanish (63.4%), French (25.8%), German (8.0%), and Japanese (2.8%) introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses (majors and minors) at a large university in the mid-southern United States. Two-thirds (67.0%) of the sample was female, with a mean age of 22.6 years (*SD* = 6.4) and a mean grade point average of 3.05 (*SD* = 0.6).

Instruments and Procedure

Participants were administered the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The FLCAS is a 33-item Likert-

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type instrument, which assesses the degree to which students feel anxious during language class. The scale has been shown to generate both reliable and valid scores. For example, Horwitz et al. (1986) reported an alpha coefficient of .93. Similarly, Aida (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .94. For the present study, the mean anxiety score was 96.87 (SD = 23.00).

Foreign language achievement scores were obtained from the foreign language instructors at the end of the semester. Each student's level of achievement comprised an average of scores, expressed as percentages, on oral and written tests, quizzes, in-class activities, and homework. Finally, students' expectations for their overall average in their current language course were measured on a 100-point scale on the first day of class.

Results

A dependent t-test revealed that students' expectations (M = 87.61, SD = 7.36) were statistically significantly higher (t = 7.46, p < .0001) than were their actual performance levels (M = 83.32, SD = 9.75). This suggests that, on average, students were over-estimating their foreign language performance. In order to determine how congruent each student's expectation was with her/his actual level of performance, difference scores were computed by subtracting the latter from the former, such that positive scores represented an over-estimation and negative scores an under-estimation. The mean difference score was 4.29 (SD = 8.38).

Based on the difference scores, the following categories were formed: (1) students whose expectations were at least 5 points lower than their actual performance were labeled as *self-derogators*; (2) students whose expectations were at least 5 points higher than their actual performance were labeled as

self-enhancers; and (3) students whose expectations were within 5 points of their actual performance were labeled as *accurate self-appraisers*. A cut-off of 5 percentage points was chosen because of its logical and empirical appeal, since 5 percentage points typically represents one-half of a letter grade at the college-level. Also, empirically, this cut-off score represented slightly more than one-half (i.e., .60) of a standard deviation of the difference scores for the present sample.

The distribution of the difference scores was as follows: self-derogators, 13.6%; self-enhancers, 47.4%; and accurate self-appraisers, 39.0%. Combining the first two proportions yielded a total of 61.0% who made expectation biases. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 39.6$, $p < .0001$) among the three expectation groups. Follow-up analyses indicated no difference between the proportion of self-enhancers and accurate self-appraisers. However, the proportion of self-derogators was significantly lower than the proportion of self-enhancers and accurate self-appraisers. In particular, the proportion of self-enhancers was more than three times as large as the proportion of self-derogators.

Analyses of variance revealed significant differences among the three expectation groups with respect to anxiety ($F_{2, 210} = 4.34$, $p < .05$) and grade point average ($F_{2, 210} = 15.64$, $p < .0001$). Scheffé's Post-Hoc analyses indicated that self-derogators had significantly higher levels of anxiety ($M = 108.33$, $SD = 21.81$) than did self-enhancers ($M = 95.47$, $SD = 22.98$) and accurate self-appraisers ($M = 94.77$, $SD = 22.51$). Additionally, self-enhancers had significantly lower levels of overall academic achievement ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.59$) than did self-derogators ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.60$) and accurate self-

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appraisers (M = 3.28, SD = 0.50).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the rate of expectation biases in the foreign language learning context. Findings indicate that the majority of students (61%) have expectation biases, with more than three times as many students exhibiting self-enhancing bias than self-derogation bias. Simply put, most students appear to have inaccurate perceptions of their foreign language abilities, with nearly half of them over-estimating their future levels of performance.

Some researchers contend that knowledge of students' self-perceptions of their foreign language competence is extremely useful for informally placing students at appropriate levels (Leblanc & Painchaud, 1985; Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999a; Read-Morfitt, 1991, Yli-Renko, 1988). The cost-effective nature of this data-collection method apparently increases its logical appeal (Leblanc & Painchaud, 1985; Read-Morfitt, 1991, Yli-Renko, 1988). Moreover, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999a) contend that determining students' expected level of foreign language performance on a 100-point scale on the first day of class can be used to identify at-risk language learners. However, the present findings suggest that knowledge of students' expectation biases may be even more informative. As such, the present study extends the body of knowledge in this area. In particular, the results indicate that the two expectation biases may have different antecedents. Specifically, students with self-derogation bias are more likely to have high levels of anxiety than are other students. This finding supports the contention of Norem and Cantor (1986) that self-derogation bias may help students to control their anxiety when performing tasks that they

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perceive to be ego-threatening. This result also supports Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999b) who reported that students with low self-perceptions of academic competence and foreign language performance were more anxious. Furthermore, it provides incremental validity to MacIntyre et al.'s (1997) small-sample study (n = 37) in which it was found that, with actual language proficiency controlled, anxious students tended to under-estimate their competence relative to their less anxious counterparts.

The result that self-enhancers tend to have lower levels of overall academic achievement supports Taylor and Brown's (1988) contention that low-achieving students, who are not necessarily unduly anxious in language classes, use self-enhancement bias to motivate themselves to expend the extra effort needed to overcome the challenge of learning the target language. Also, it is possible that low-academic achieving self-enhancers underestimate the difficulty of learning a foreign language as adults in college and that these learners need counseling to align their actual effort, achievement, and expectations so that unrealistic expectations do not lead to disappointment, frustration, and de-motivation.

In any case, the fact that self-derogators tend to be more anxious and that self-enhancers tend to be lower achievers suggests that self-enhancement bias and self-derogation bias are different phenomena. Indeed, future research should compare other characteristics that discriminate the three expectation groups. These characteristics might include cognitive variables such as aptitude and personality variables such as levels of motivation, self-confidence, and social interdependence orientation, since these variables have been found to play a role in the foreign language learning context (Clément,

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1980; Clément, Donyei, & Noels, 1994; Clément & Kruidenier, 1985; Gardner, 1985; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999a). Perhaps most importantly, however, methods of identifying self-derogators and self-enhancers as early as possible are needed, that is, rather than waiting until the end of the foreign language course when overall course grades are available. For example, students' expectations could be compared to their performance in prior foreign language courses taken at the college level or even at the high school level. Alternatively, these expectations could be compared to a student's performance on an initial diagnostic test, first assignment, or in-class examination in order to determine whether expectation bias is present.

It is likely that self-enhancement bias has a greater potential than does self-derogation bias to facilitate language learning, since language anxiety, a feature of the latter, has been implicated as a probable cause of foreign language learning difficulties (e.g., Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999a). However, it is not clear whether over-estimation is detrimental to performance in foreign language classes relative to accurate expectations. Thus, future research should explore further the role of self-enhancement in the foreign language learning context.

The present findings suggest that differentiating between self-derogation and self-enhancement biases not only "provides an avenue for understanding how higher levels of language anxiety endure" (MacIntyre et al., 1997, p. 278), but also helps researchers and educators in the field to understand further the role of expectations in foreign language courses. Such differentiation may help foreign language instructors target specific interventions for students with expectation biases. Thus, we hope that this study is replicated and

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extended. MacIntyre et al. (1997) contended that their research has "open[ed] the door for future research on the role of self-perceptions and expectancies in the language learning process" (p. 280). We believe that the present investigation represents a first step through that door.

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